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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DAMASCUS 000756

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR S/ES-O, NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA  
NSC FOR ABRAMS  
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: UPDATE FROM DAMASCUS: SARG BRIEFS DIPLOMATIC  
CORPS ON ORDER TO CLOSE AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER AND  
DAMASCUS COMMUNITY SCHOOL

REF: A. DAMASCUS 741

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 744

[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 745

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Tim Pounds for reasons 1.5 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad briefed local diplomatic missions October 29 on the SARG's decision to order the closure of the American Cultural Center (ACC) and American School (DCS). He received push-back from a number of missions, especially regarding closure of the latter. Readouts from other embassies follow. At 1500 local today, Post received official verbal notification of the SARG's decision from MFA Chief of Protocol Abdul Latif Dabbaugh, who conveyed SARG's decision to order the immediate closure of the ACC and to close DCS no later than November 6. We will report septel on Charge's conversation with Dabbaugh and options on how to proceed. Embassy is also requesting clearance to close tomorrow (October 30) for security reasons due to a scheduled protest (EAC cable also septel). End Summary

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SYRIAN MFA DENOUNCES U.S. ACTIONS TO DIPLOMATIC CORPS  
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[1](#)2. (C) Foreign Minister Faysal Miqdad hosted a three briefings for the resident diplomatic on the morning of October 29. According to readouts from attendees, he consistently highlighted the SARG's view of the events of October 26 and communicated the SARG's decision to close the American Cultural Center and the Damascus Community School. Post received a series of read-outs from diplomatic colleagues in attendance, including the Canadians, French, British, Egyptians and Romanians.

[1](#)3. (C) According to Canadian, British, French, Egyptian and Romanian diplomats who attended the briefings, Miqdad spoke for about 30 minutes, detailing the Syrian version of the events of October 26. He stated all eight Syrian fatalities were civilians. Miqdad condemned the incident, calling it a American aggression and an unprovoked terrorist attack. He thanked the representatives of countries which had condemned the attack publicly and said that Syria had called on UN Security Council and other international bodies to weigh in as well. UK DCM Irfan Siddiq reported that Miqdad called on

EU member states to condemn the attack, and said that the U.S. had shown no respect for Syria's sovereignty or "international norms." The Japanese Ambassador reportedly asked for clarification on the number of civilians killed and requested the SARG to allow Ambassadors to participate in a SMI-organized trip to Abu Kamal. Miqdad said he would look into the request.

¶4. (C) Syria is doing its part to respond to the international terrorist threat, Miqdad stated. He claimed the September 27th car bomb attack in Damascus was linked to the SARG's strengthening of border controls. When questioned directly by the French Ambassador on Abu Ghadiyah, Miqdad replied that he (Abu Ghadiyah was not in Syria, that he was "on our list" of terrorists and would be arrested if he tried to cross into Syria. The French then asked if the SARG could confirm that children had been killed in the strike. Miqdad did not reply.

¶5. (C) Miqdad made a reference to what he said had been the "U.S. and Israeli" attack on Al-Kibar and revisited SARG points on that event. He contrasted the lack of US official comment with the robust USG response in the aftermath of the Israeli strike against the suspected al Kibar nuclear site.

¶6. (C) According to the UK Charge, Miqdad hypothesized that Iraqi officials had no prior notice of the attack, and said this was an indication that "all agreements with Iraq are not being utilized." He added that the SARG was "disappointed" in Iraq's initial public response to the strike.

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¶7. (C) The Danish representative asked Miqdad what the SARG wanted from the Americans. He replied that Syria wanted an apology from the USG, and a "clean cut" statement of events.

¶8. (C) The Egyptian Polcouns whose Ambassador attended a briefing specifically for Arab countries, said that Miqdad termed the attack as an "act of American aggression" against the Arab world. Miqdad expressed appreciation to the Egyptian government and Arab League for strong statements condemning the U.S. Miqdad communicated the Council of Minister's October 28 decision to order the closure of the American school and Cultural Center. Syria was exercising its UN Charter rights to respond to a U.S. violation of its sovereignty launched from a country it was illegally occupying. The United States was guilty of "war crimes in Iraq" and had now killed innocent civilians in Syria. The Arab world needed to denounce the Administration's policies in a unified voice, Miqdad preached.

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DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY PROTESTS CLOSURE OF SCHOOL  
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¶9. (C) Led by Turkey, France, the Czech Republic, Canada, Egypt and Hungary, participants in all three briefings pushed back on the decision to close the American school, saying it was the wrong way to retaliate, and asked the SARG to reconsider. According to Canadian Ambassador Davidson, Miqdad noted that the SARG cabinet had decided to close the American School and Cultural Center and that the decision would be formally communicated to the U.S. charge later the same day. He remarked that the U.S. actions had provoked hostility among Syrian public opinion and could not go unpunished. Davidson told Charge he was the first to speak when the floor was opened to questions to the Western Hemisphere group. He thanked FM for the briefing and the SARG for arranging a visit for defense attaches to Abu Kamal. He noted that Canada always regretted the deaths of civilians. He advised the SARG not to close the school. The American population of the school represented only 20 percent of the student body, and there were 44 other nationalities affected. As Syria moved to embrace the international community and be embraced by it, closing the school would

rove counterproductive. It also would not reflect Syria's heritage of tolerance and respect for cultural values. The Indian Ambassador passionately supported the Canadian Ambassador. He said DCS was a key factor for many diplomats in accepting a posting in Damascus. He also noted that the closure was particularly harsh on students in their last year preparing for graduation and university.

¶10. (C) In the EU briefing, the French Ambassador (supported by the Danish, Turkish, and Czech Ambassadors) went so far as to say that the SARG "should act against the U.S. Embassy, but not against the children." Miqdad did not respond. (Siddiq later told us that, if the SARG is "sensible," it will find a "face-saving way to back down" from their position on the school)

¶11. (C) In the Arab group meeting, the Egyptian Ambassador expressed concern about the closure of the American school, arguing that the Syrian government's decision would punish the entire international community in Damascus unfairly. (The Egyptian Ambassador has two children in the DCS; he is planning to send his wife and two children back to Cairo if the decision holds.) Miqdad said the Education Ministry had instructions to work with the DCS administration and U.S. Embassy to implement the cabinet's decision in a way that took "the needs of students into account." No one in the audience asked for clarification.

¶12. (C) The Egyptian Ambassador also asked about the status of the November 22 meeting of the Border Security Working Group scheduled to be held in Damascus. (Note: We just received a dipnote dated 10/26 inviting the U.S. to send an observer delegation.) Miqdad replied that the SARG was currently reviewing whether to hold the meeting as scheduled.

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How Others Are Seeing Events  
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¶13. (C) French Ambassador Michel Duclos' account tracked that of the other read-outs except that he estimated Miqdad's tone and comments during the meeting showed more anger toward the Iraqis than toward the Americans. He told Charge that PM Otri had postponed his visit to Baghdad, which he interpreted as a victory for Iran. Duclos conveyed concern with how fallout from the attack could influence Syrian policy in other areas, estimating that the process with the Israeli's would be most affected. The Lebanon track may not be affected, "if we are fortunate." He said that the Palestinian situation probably would not change much. The timing of the attack was curious, he said, pointing to the seemingly positive meetings between the USG and SARG in New York. This reminded him of the positive developments between the Syrians and the Israelis in the days leading up to the al Kibar strike. In both cases an "element of hope" may have been undermined.

¶14. (C) On October 28th, the same day that the Cabinet reportedly took the decision to close the American school, Duclos himself was called in to meet with the Education Minister, who complained that a French Lysee textbook contains a map identifying Syria as a "rogue state, according to the U.S." Duclos expressed his frustration with the Syrian Education Ministry, and said that administrative issues related to the French school in Damascus are taking up an inordinate amount of his time. "Our institutions in Damascus make us very vulnerable" to SARG pressure, he told the CDA.

¶15. (C) Across the board, our dip contacts are eagerly awaiting an official U.S. position. An Egyptian Embassy contact shared that his Ambassador and some MFA contacts in Cairo had been "astounded" by the lack of any official

response. The absence of an USG efforts to explain its side of the story had put America's allies in a quandary and had led the GOE to issue a critical statement, the Egyptian asserted. He said the Syrian government was "working overtime" to use the 10/26 incident to "drive a wedge between the U.S. and the Maliki government." He had heard from Iraqi and other sources that the Syrian goal was to intensify Iraqi opposition to a Security Framework/SOFA in the hope of damaging the legacy of the current administration. He also expressed concern about the safety of U.S. Embassy personnel.

"The Syrians know how to play dirty," he warned, suggesting that groups such as PFLP-GC, Hamas, and others might take the strong Syrian condemnations as a signal to "do more than protest" U.S. military actions.

¶15. (C) UK DCM Irfan Siddiq also said the lack of official USG comment on the situation is "shocking," as it leaves the USG "open to so much criticism." He told the CDA that he hopes "Washington will figure out the proper line and start issuing it soon," adding, "You need it."

¶17. (C) Duclos also mentioned that the French Embassy in Washington had heard from State Department officials who were angry with the French communiqu. He told the CDA that the USG must understand that the French government spent an entire day trying to formulate a response with no input from their Washington interlocutors.

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PROTESTS SCHEDULED  
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¶18. (C) Al-Watan news paper reported that a protest is against the U.S. is schedule to take place at 1700 October 31 near the Old City in Damascus. Post also received reports that demonstrations were to take place today, but we have seen no indications of such activity as of 1530.

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POST ACTIONS  
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¶19. (C) In advance of a possible closure of the ACC, which houses several other Post offices, staff removed critical medical and human resources files last night (October 28). Per septel, EAC recommends closure of the Embassy October 30 due to planned protest. A press release and warden message will be distributed to alert the public to this closure. Additionally, Post will convene a town-hall meeting on November 2 to detail the events of the past week to the Embassy community and express Post's appreciation to our local staff members.

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